

Education policy is not all there is. Protecting the “least among us” extends far beyond Medicaid recipients and at-risk children. Without adequate national security and without rational foreign and domestic policy we all are at-risk of becoming weak and vulnerable.

Too often we accept the false premise that meeting the challenge of “protecting the weak and oppressed” is affected only through charitable acts. I believe there is opportunity for all people to serve others. The business executive who values fairness, teachers, soldiers, police officers, students -- any profession, guided by good values -- can serve others.

I was a state prosecutor for 15 years and prided myself on standing up for the weak, the abused child, the assaulted spouse or victim of rape. I tried to be motivated more by “compassion for the victims” than “contempt for the criminal.”

But, either way, the bad guys went to jail.

We all have a duty to stand up to bullies who prey on the weak, whether it be a predatory lender, a drug trafficker or a terrorist.

And there is a right way and a wrong way to do it.

We are a nation of laws. That is a fundamental American value. If we do not follow those laws, in the name of catching the bad guys, then we are the bad guys.

There are no exceptions. Ethics are not optional, whether you are making the law or enforcing it.

I was aggressive in prosecuting international drug traffickers but always cautious and responsible when I used wire taps and investigative grand juries. It is important to have the tools to protect our people, but critical to never abuse those tools.

It is equally important to use any power given us by the people, for the benefit of the people. And when we set policy, we have a duty to make good policy that succeeds.

Success requires thoughtful policy and intelligent action. Failing this, we put people at risk, and we are weaker and more vulnerable.

We can never forget that there are consequences to bad policy. Whether it is economic policy that shifts more risk and burden to the poor or badly-planned foreign policy that puts soldiers at risk abroad and compromises citizens’ security at home, poor decisions hurt people. Wrong-headed policy puts people at risk.

The votes cast by legislatures or Congress matter in people’s lives and demand scrutiny as well. The consequences can be long-lasting and the harm irreparable. And belated apologies are poor remedies for reckless votes.

It is easy to be too generous with the sacrifice of others, and too stingy with our own.

We, in public life, must do more than commit to protect the “least of our brethren” only when it is politically convenient, expedient and easy. We must keep that commitment when it is not expedient, inconvenient and hard.